

KEYS TO SUCCESS IN
BLACKJACK AND IN LIFE

BURNING THE

TABLES

IN

LAS VEGAS

IAN ANDERSEN

Burning the Tables in Las Vegas

Keys to Success
in Blackjack and in Life

Ian Andersen

Foreword by Stanford Wong

Huntington Press Publishing
Las Vegas, Nevada

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
1. Basic Strategy	5
2. How the Game Has Changed	10
3. Choosing Your Count – The “KISS” Principle	19
4. Psychological Profile of a Winning High-Stakes Player.....	27
5. The High Roller.....	42
6. Your P&L Statement – Penetration and Longevity	56
7. The Ultimate Gambit with Stanford Wong	79
8. Crazy Surrender.....	105
9. For Green-Chip Players	117
10. Blackjack Debates	135
11. Amazing and Amusing Incidents (All True).....	153
12. On Guises and Disguises.....	166
13. Psychological Aspects of the Game	178

14.	Understanding Casino Thinking.....	198
15.	Tips & Tipoffs.....	218
16.	Managing Risk	266
17.	International Play	275
18.	On Maintaining Physical and Mental Fitness	291
19.	Epilogue	313
	Appendix I—Glossary of Terms.....	315
	Appendix II – Blackjack Resources	320
	Appendix III—Other Resources	324
	Index.....	330
	About the Author	335

Basic Strategy

1

In writing this book I've made one assumption: that every reader knows how to play blackjack. Thus, I don't explain the rules, procedures, or etiquette of the game. I don't assume, however, that you're familiar with basic strategy. If you are, you may wish to skip this chapter. But for those of you who aren't, this chapter provides an important element that you'll need to appreciate the rest of the book.

Basic strategy is a system for playing every hand against every dealer upcard in the best possible manner, without counting cards. It differs slightly, depending on whether you're playing against a hand-held game (single- or double-deck) or against a multi-deck game dealt from a shoe. Basic strategy is also affected by changes in rules.

Following are the basic strategy playing tables for hand-held and multiple-deck blackjack games. In each case, the table assumes the most prevalent set of rules, which restricts doubling down to the original hand. Some casinos allow you to double down after splitting a pair. The tables on page 8 illustrate the basic strategy for this rule variation. Another variable is surrender; the proper use of this option, when available, is incorporated in the primary tables.

Basic strategy was developed by using computers to

BASIC STRATEGY

Basic Strategy—Hand-Held

(doubling after splitting not permitted)

PLAYER'S HAND	DEALER'S UPCARD									
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	A
17	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S
16	S	S	S	S	S	H	H	H	Sr	Sr
15	S	S	S	S	S	H	H	H	Sr	H
14	S	S	S	S	S	H	H	H	H	H
13	S	S	S	S	S	H	H	H	H	H
12	H	H	S	S	S	H	H	H	H	H
11	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D
10	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	H	H
9	D	D	D	D	D	H	H	H	H	H
8	H	H	H	D	D	H	H	H	H	H
A,8	S	S	S	S	D	S	S	S	S	S
A,7	S	D	D	D	D	S	S	H	H	S
A,6	D	D	D	D	D	H	H	H	H	H
A,5	H	H	D	D	D	H	H	H	H	H
A,4	H	H	D	D	D	H	H	H	H	H
A,3	H	H	D	D	D	H	H	H	H	H
A,2	H	H	D	D	D	H	H	H	H	H
A,A	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP
T,T	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S
9,9	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	S	SP	SP	S	S
8,8	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP
7,7	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	H	H	S	H
6,6	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	H	H	H	H	H
5,5	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	H	H
4,4	H	H	H	D	D	H	H	H	H	H
3,3	H	H	SP	SP	SP	SP	H	H	H	H
2,2	H	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	H	H	H	H

KEY

S = Stand

D = Double down

SP = Split

H = Hit

Sr = Surrender (If you can't surrender then hit.)

Basic Strategy—Multi-Deck

(doubling after splitting not permitted)

PLAYER'S	DEALER'S UPCARD									
HAND	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	A
17	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S
16	S	S	S	S	S	H	H	Sr	Sr	Sr
15	S	S	S	S	S	H	H	H	Sr	H
14	S	S	S	S	S	H	H	H	H	H
13	S	S	S	S	S	H	H	H	H	H
12	H	H	S	S	S	H	H	H	H	H
11	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	H
10	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	H	H
9	H	D	D	D	D	H	H	H	H	H
8	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H
A,8	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S
A,7	S	D	D	D	D	S	S	H	H	H
A,6	H	D	D	D	D	H	H	H	H	H
A,5	H	H	D	D	D	H	H	H	H	H
A,4	H	H	D	D	D	H	H	H	H	H
A,3	H	H	H	D	D	H	H	H	H	H
A,2	H	H	H	D	D	H	H	H	H	H
A,A	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP
T,T	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S
9,9	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	S	SP	SP	S	S
8,8	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP
7,7	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	H	H	H	H
6,6	H	SP	SP	SP	SP	H	H	H	H	H
5,5	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	H	H
4,4	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H
3,3	H	H	SP	SP	SP	SP	H	H	H	H
2,2	H	H	SP	SP	SP	SP	H	H	H	H

Splitting Pairs—Hand-Held

(doubling after splitting permitted)

PLAYER'S	DEALER'S UPCARD						
HAND	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>8</u>
2,2	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	H
3,3	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP
4,4	H	H	SP	SP	SP	H	H
5,5	NEVER SPLIT						
6,6	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	H
7,7	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP

Splitting Pairs—Multi-Deck

(doubling after splitting permitted)

PLAYER'S	DEALER'S UPCARD					
HAND	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>7</u>
2,2	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP
3,3	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP
4,4	H	H	H	SP	SP	H
5,5	NEVER SPLIT					
6,6	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	H
7,7	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP	SP

run high-speed simulations involving hundreds of millions of blackjack hands. Every professional player knows basic strategy cold. By itself, playing according to basic strategy is not enough to win — you must also be an expert card counter, which is discussed in Chapter 3 — but it forms the platform from which you make almost all your playing decisions (occasionally the count will alter your decision). There's just no way around learning it if you want to play blackjack skillfully.

You must not only memorize these tables, but also be so totally familiar with them that you can make each of the required plays routinely without having to give it even a moment's thought. You will need to focus your attention elsewhere if you are to become a winning player. Basic strategy must be automatic.

Note: Purists may bristle at the suggestion that you use the "hand-held" strategy for double-deck play. While it's not precise, the loss in expectation is negligible. The reader who wants the perfect basic strategy for any number of decks and combination of rules is referred to Peter Griffin's *The Theory of Blackjack*.

For further reading, see "Appendix II."

How the Game Has Changed

2

In 1962, the book that has had the greatest impact on the game of blackjack, *Beat the Dealer* by Edward O. Thorp, was published. Thorp's system was based on deriving a ratio of ten-value cards to cards that had a value other than ten. Thus, at the beginning of a single-deck game, the ratio is 36/16, representing 36 non-tens divided by 16 tens, or 2.25.

Starting at 36/16, the player subtracts one from the numerator (36) for each non-ten seen, and subtracts one from the denominator (16) each time a ten is played. When the ratio falls below 2.0, the odds shift from favoring the house to favoring the player. By increasing bets when the ratio is below 2.0, the player tends to win more of the bigger bets, resulting in a net win.

Thorp's count had some substantial benefits, including 100% accuracy for insurance-bet purposes. Since insurance pays 2-to-1, whenever the ratio fell below 2.0, taking insurance was profitable.

Beat the Dealer received a lot of attention in the Nevada casinos immediately following its release, and many casino executives read Thorp's book. In those days, casinos weren't owned by New York Stock Exchange companies and managed by Harvard MBAs as they are now. Far from it. They

were connected to, if not owned by, the mob. When Thorp's book came out, the mob instructed its pit bosses to watch for counters; when they suspected someone, they brought in a "mechanic," a dealer who knew how to cheat.

When I began playing blackjack, I used Thorp's count. I remember a session at a major casino that opened in the late 1960s. At the time, single decks were used in every casino, and I was a green-chip (\$25) player, betting from \$25 to \$250. I was up a couple thousand bucks when a new dealer appeared at my game: a dwarf. He carried a stool so he could stand high enough to deal the game. The original dealer, who'd been on the game only about 15 minutes, looked a bit puzzled.

"Go to table twelve," a pit boss named Blacky barked. The original dealer scurried off.

"How are you?" the dwarf purred in a raspy voice.

"I'm doin' okay so far," I ventured.

"Place your bets," he said.

I won the first hand, and the second. The count got good and I jumped my bet. The dwarf dealt quickly and smoothly. He showed a ten. I busted. I spread to two hands of \$250 each. Again he showed a ten, this time with an ace in the hole. Blackjack.

"Aw, I'm sorry," he said. "Your luck seems to have turned."

I looked up and noticed that the pit boss was standing a couple of tables away talking with a colleague, paying no attention to the game. Another ten showed for the dealer. I hit and busted.

Within a half-hour, I went from \$2,000 winner to \$3,500 loser! I rarely won a hand. The dealer showed a remarkable number of tens and almost never busted. I grew suspicious and started observing him carefully, watching his eyes in particular. When he collected my chips, he turned the deck over. Rather than looking at my chips, his gaze was on the cards. I became convinced that he was peeking at the top card. If it was a 9, a ten, or an ace, he'd deal me the second

card. If the top card was a small card, he would deal it to me. The combination of peeking and dealing seconds gave the house an insurmountable advantage. Nearly \$4,000 loser now, I rose to leave.

"Where ya goin'?" the dwarf rasped. "I'm just getting warmed up." He laughed derisively as I headed for the door. "Come back anytime. I'll be waiting."

You needn't be overly concerned about getting cheated in today's casinos. The mob, to the best of my knowledge, is no longer involved in Nevada casino gambling, and gaming-control authorities worldwide are, for the most part, honest protective organizations. I'm not saying that there's absolutely no cheating today; I'm saying that it's extremely rare and not worthy of concern. Still, if you suspect a dealer of cheating, change tables immediately. You'll never be able to prove it, so there's not much else you can do. Just leave, then make a notation in your records to avoid that dealer in the future.

Using mechanics was just one of the more devious countermeasures the casinos employed in the late '60s to foil card counters. Some casinos, especially in downtown Las Vegas, resorted to strong-arm tactics, going so far as to rough up suspected counters. While I was never subjected to this, I know several players who were, and I witnessed one such event personally.

I was at a show in one of the "blue-collar" Strip hotels with a friend who's a world-class blackjack player. After the show he walked up to an empty single-deck 21 table. He bet \$300, won, then spread to two hands of \$500 each. I needed to make a phone call, so I didn't see what happened next, but when I returned, he was gone. Vanished!

I asked the pit boss, "What happened to the guy who was here?"

He asked, "Is he a friend of yours?"

"Yeah," I replied.

"Well you'd better start keeping better company," he

said. "That guy is a known card cheat. They've taken him to the back for questioning."

Although I was shocked, I quickly recovered, thinking fast of a way to help him. "Look, you'd better be careful. That man has a heart condition and I'm his lawyer," I lied. "I want to be taken to him immediately."

The pit boss made a couple of phone calls, and two security guards escorted me past the laundry room to a small room in the bowels of the hotel. My friend was there, handcuffed to a chair.

"You his lawyer?" I was asked.

"Yes," I lied again, now feeling scared and desperate.

"Well, you can pick him up downtown. We've already called the police and they're on the way."

"What's the charge?" I asked.

"Trespassing. This guy is a card cheat and he's been eighty-sixed from here before. We told him if he ever came back we'd arrest him and that's just what we're goin' to do."

As it turned out, the police held my friend in a cell overnight and released him in the morning without charging him. I was shaken by the experience. It reinforced my already-firm belief that you should never push things in casinos where you've encountered "heat." I've held on to that notion as gospel for the last 30 years.

Mechanics and muscle were certainly the most potent countermeasures the casinos used against card counters in the late '60s. But that's also when they began employing the more subtle anti-counter techniques, many of which still exist today – shuffling up on suspected counters, for example. When you jumped your bet, the dealer shuffled. Obviously, any advantage you might have had got shuffled away. If you were dense and still didn't get the message, you got barred.

Still, the casinos had a problem. Shuffling up annoyed other players and slowed down the game, which cut into

revenues. Enter multiple decks. Instead of one deck, some casinos started dealing four decks. Although 36/16 was a relatively easy number to deal with, 144/64, its counterpart against a 4-deck shoe, was more unwieldy for the counter.

Right on schedule, Thorp's revised version of *Beat the Dealer* appeared in 1966, unveiling the first plus-minus count. Then, in 1969, Lawrence Revere wrote a book called *Playing Blackjack as a Business*, which expanded on the plus-minus count. This method of counting cards could be used for one deck or for shoes, but it was still more difficult for players to count down a shoe than a single deck and many got discouraged. Also, there were more so-called "waiting bets" (minimum bets when the odds favor the house) when playing against shoes. Consequently, a player's bet spread had to be greater against a shoe than a single deck to compensate for the money lost on waiting bets.

Over time, casinos became more comfortable with 4-deck games, and they became the norm. To be sure, a number of casinos retained one or two single- or double-deck games, mostly as promotional draws. Still, these games were the focus of their most intense scrutiny, and no more than about half the cards were dealt. Also, these games tended to be full, limiting the earning potential of professional counters. Other casinos kept all of their single-deck games, but tightened the rules. Games in Lake Tahoe and Reno, for example, continue to be predominantly single-deck, but the dealer hits soft 17 and the player is allowed to double down on 10 or 11 only.

It was indeed more difficult for the skilled player to play against the multi-deck shoe games, but it was still possible to win. It required finding games with good "penetration" – where the dealer dealt 80% or more of the cards before shuffling – and maintaining a greater bet spread. Since the casinos felt more secure about these games, they scrutinized the play less. Soon a succession of books introducing new counting systems were published, and the better players

quickly adapted to the multi-deck games. When the cat gets smarter, so does the mouse.

The casinos countered again, going to more decks; 6- and 8-deck shoes were introduced. Players adjusted to this by avoiding negative shoes altogether. This can be accomplished in two ways. One is by “back-counting” (also known as “wonging”). Back-counting requires standing behind the players and counting the cards as they’re dealt from a freshly shuffled shoe. When the count gets good, the player joins the game and makes a big bet. As long as the shoe stays good, he plays; when it turns bad, he leaves. In the second method, the player starts at the beginning of a shoe and stays as long as the count is even or positive. If the count goes negative, he promptly leaves, only to start again with a freshly shuffled shoe at another table.

The Eye

It’s more difficult to consistently win big today than it was in the 1960s and early 1970s. I find that multiple-deck shoes are more boring to play against than single or double decks. Shoe games require more patience. They sap energy more quickly. And overall they offer lower expectation than hand-held games.

Casino surveillance has improved as well. It used to be routine for decisions about counters to be made by the floorman on the game, sometimes in consultation with the shift boss or casino manager. This provided opportunities to strike up friendships with floormen (which I described in detail in *Turning the Tables on Las Vegas*). By finding ways to ingratiate myself to these powerful decision-makers, it was easy to preserve my status as a desirable customer.

After all, “It’s not my money,” as so many floormen have readily told me over the years. While in some casinos

the floorman still has control over the games he supervises, most casinos now use the “eye in the sky” for surveillance (the overhead high-tech surveillance system lodged behind those black bubbles in the ceiling).

The first time I encountered the eye was many years ago (early '80s) at Harrah's Lake Tahoe. I was playing at a single-deck table where they dealt down to around 17 cards. I was delighted that no one seemed to be paying attention to my game. “How sweet is this!” I thought, becoming more aggressive with my bet spreads. Whereas normally I'd spread \$100 to \$400 against a single deck, I now took the liberty of spreading to two hands of \$500 each.

After all, no one was watching – so I thought. Not more than 15 minutes later, a “suit” approached me from outside the pit and politely but firmly informed me that I was “too good for them” and that blackjack was off my menu. “How about a nice game of roulette?” he asked with a snicker. “As good as you are at counting, you should be able to count to thirty-six with no problem.”

I must admit, I was duly impressed. How the hell could I schmooze a guy perched 30 feet above my table, observing me with a high-powered zoom camera? This, indeed, presented a new challenge.

As technology continued to advance, overhead surveillance became more and more common. Soon casinos were able to videotape all games and, if suspicious, review hours of play at their leisure. The technology improved to the point where they could read the time on my watch dial from a room far removed from the casino. They could also follow me as I moved around the casino from pit to pit and table to table. There was no avoiding this new vigilance.

At one of my favorite joints, I was pulled up not while playing, but rather when I called to make my reservation for a trip a month later. The VIP Services department put my call on hold and referred it to the casino manager, who gave me the bad news – no more blackjack. That was twice I'd

been burned! When I found out that a good friend of mine, an excellent player, was working for a Strip hotel, on call 24 hours a day to observe suspected counters from the eye in the sky, I became convinced that this method of detection was a real threat to my longevity as a player.

But I'm not easily discouraged. From that day on, I simply assumed that every play I made was being watched from a remote location by trained personnel, and I modified my strategy to cope with this new situation.

To devise an effective strategy against these new sophisticated countermeasures, I had to put myself in the position of a reasonably well-informed casino executive. This executive has probably read a book or two on blackjack and is familiar with basic strategy, card counting, and the fact that there are a lot of half-smart players out there just itching to take on the house (and lose their money in the process). These players he wants to keep. He's seen many players jump their bets when a bunch of small cards come out without really knowing what they're doing. He's seen many bad players win big bucks, some on more than one occasion. He's well aware of the naturally occurring fluctuations. He knows that the casino has a small advantage over the basic strategy player and will ultimately grind down a player who isn't proficient at counting. He's observed many players who maintain control when they book small wins, only to go off like Roman candles when they get behind, blowing a bundle.

When it comes to counters, he knows what to look for. He's not so concerned about a player being a counter per se; he's concerned only about those good enough to win. His stereotype is a young player in his late 20s or early 30s who usually tries to slip into the casino unnoticed, avoids being rated or giving his name, plays basic strategy with some telling key variations, and varies his bet in robotic fashion, while rapt in concentration. This player usually seems equally emotionless whether he's just won or lost a \$1,000 bet. He probably handles his chips well and may even be able to cut

and shuffle them using only one hand, a sure tip-off that the guy's played a lot of cards. If he's really talented, he might even be able to roll a chip from finger to finger across the back of his hand, a talent that immediately puts the casino executive on red alert.

Now I assume that every time I play I'm being observed by someone who thinks similarly to what I've just described. My job is to convince this observer that I don't fit his profile. Sure, I may look knowledgeable on occasion, but I do certain things that reassure him that I'm not a threat. For a while he may be unsure, especially if I'm winning, as is often the case. But the more he watches, the more he becomes convinced that I fall into that half-smart group and, ultimately, I'll become a cropper. Once he's concluded that I'm a loser, he'll turn his attention to finding more dangerous fish to catch—they're out there, getting hooked every day. But not me.

And so the game goes on and on. The skilled card counter is constantly looking for new moves to exploit the casinos, while the casinos continue in their efforts to close loopholes and back off players who they believe threaten their bottom lines.

In this book I show you how to dance between the raindrops. Is it possible? Indeed it is! What does it take?

Read on.